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Mid-career academic women: Strategies, choices and motivation

Kelly Coate, Camille B. Kandiko Howson and Tania de St Croix

KING'S
College
LONDON

Small Development Projects

Small development projects (SDPs) were first launched in 2004 - shortly after the creation of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Since then they have proven to be very popular and have introduced a range of innovative activities of benefit to higher education.

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Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

Peer House

8 -14 Verulam Street

London WC1X 8LZ

England

Tel: +44 (0)20 3468 4810

Fax: +44 (0)020 3468 4811

E-mail: info@lfhe.ac.uk

www.lfhe.ac.uk

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Project leaders:

Kelly Coate,
King's College London;

Camille B. Kandiko Howson,
King's College London

Research associate:

Tania de St Croix

Funded by:

Leadership Foundation for
Higher Education

Steering group:

Professor Miriam David,
Institute of Education, UCL;

Professor Liz Doherty,
Sheffield Hallam University;

Professor Carole Leathwood,
London Metropolitan University

Administration:

King's Learning Institute,
King's College London

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01 Summary

This is the final report from a project funded by the Leadership Foundation that focused on the career strategies of mid-career academic women in the UK. The project contributes to literature exploring the under-representation of women at senior levels in higher education. This research differs from previous research in that we focused not on senior women who have made it to the top, but rather those who feel they are at a mid-career stage. It develops earlier research on the role that prestige plays in academic careers, and aims to explore the extent to which prestige is a gendered concept in academia (Coate & Kandiko Howson, 2014).

The research on which this report is based was conducted between September and December 2014 and consisted of 30 qualitative interviews with self-identified 'mid-career' academic women working in a range of higher education institutions in London. The interviews started with a concept-mapping exercise in which interviewees produced visual representations of their career plans for the next five to 10 years. We discussed these maps with them, asking questions about the obstacles and opportunities they perceived in terms of their career development, about the role of prestige in promotion and progression, and about other forms of recognition and reward.

The key themes to emerge were, first, that the midway stage of an academic career is long, ill-defined and lacks the targeted support of the early career stage, while often coinciding with periods of increased caring responsibilities. Second, we found that women take highly individual approaches to career planning, which tends to reinforce the belief that whether one progresses or not is a matter of individual responsibility. There is a large array of complicating contextual factors that could lead to further progression or even the decision to leave academia, and yet lack of progression was somehow viewed as individual failure.

In terms of the concept of prestige, we found that women generally feel that men access 'indicators of esteem' more easily (eg, invitations to give keynotes, editorial positions). Many women had ambivalent feelings about gaining recognition through prestige: they understood the importance of status and knew the 'rules of the game', but were sometimes critical of these rules and reluctant to pursue prestige. Finally, most women acknowledged the challenges of maintaining a work-life balance, but their experiences and perceptions of support varied widely, even within the same institution.

This report makes a number of recommendations, many of which would entail developing departmental and institutional cultures that foster a collective sense of responsibility and reward, as well as greater awareness of the impact of decisions on gendered patterns of inequality.

The research has led to a better understanding of the trajectory of women's careers at mid-career level, and contributed to understanding the gendered dimensions of the 'prestige economy'. This report and its recommendations will we hope be a useful resource to ensure that leadership programmes are better equipped to understand women's motivation and to facilitate change. ■

02 Background

Several decades of research have demonstrated that women continue to be under-represented in senior positions in higher education (Morley, 2014; Dean et al, 2009; White et al, 2011; Doherty & Manfredi, 2006). Some 80 per cent of professors in the UK are men, whereas the only academic category in which women are in the majority is part-time non-managerial roles (ECU, 2013). Despite this, higher education institutions can often be 'complacent about what has been achieved for staff and hence, to think that "gender" is solved by having a majority of female undergraduates and a few female professors' (Deem, 2014, p.147; see also David, 2014; Leathwood & Read, 2009).

While there are signs of improvement in some areas, others remain static or are deteriorating. For example, the proportion of women at vice-chancellor level is on the decline (Bebbington, 2012), while in 2015, only two of the 43 mid-career scientists awarded Royal Society University Research Fellowships were women (Royal Society, 2015). These gender imbalances are compounded by wider forms of inequality and under-representation on the basis of 'race', socio-economic status, nationality, ethnic group, disability, religion and geographic region (Banks, 2002). The Equality Challenge Unit (ECU, 2013) highlights the stark statistic that only 2.8 per cent of female black and minority ethnic academics are professors, in comparison with the 15.9 per cent of white male academics who are professors (see also David, 2014).

In this context, the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education funded this research project, titled 'Mid-career Academic Women: Strategies, Choices and Motivations', as a Small Development Project. The research draws on an innovative methodological approach – concept-map mediated interviews – to explore how mid-career academic women strategise their career development, and what barriers they perceive. The project provides insights into women's perspectives at a stage when they may or may not be motivated to consider aspiring towards leadership positions.

Previous projects funded by the Leadership Foundation on the topic of motivation have highlighted the role of prestige in recruitment and promotion decisions (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). We use the term 'prestige economy' (English, 2005) to describe the collection of beliefs, values and behaviours that characterise and express what a group of people prizes highly. Evidence collected on publication rates, first-author status and workload balance indicates that academic women find it harder to access the types of 'currency' that advance their career; we therefore consider prestige to be a gendered concept (Coate & Kandiko Howson, 2014). We are interested in how women perceive academic indicators of esteem and how they strategise their careers accordingly. We are also interested in the apparent individualisation of academic careers, and how this affects and is affected by gender inequalities.

This project examines the career strategies of academic women who self-identify as being at a mid-career stage. The research aims to share the strategies that women have found useful in developing their careers, whilst arguing for institutional change. Although focused primarily on gender, we also draw on feminist theories of intersectionality to consider multiple forms of identity (Crenshaw, 1991; Berger & Guidroz, 2009; Jones, 2009). This conceptualisation reflects a perspective of universities as highly complex sites, where multiple and intersecting spheres of 'difference' – including culture, ethnicity, gender, disability, socio-economic status and language – interact. ■

03 Aims and objectives

This project aimed to develop greater understanding of academic women's careers, benefitting those in academic and leadership positions, using the following approaches:

- I Gain insight into the career strategies and perceived barriers of mid-career academic women.
- I Raise the profile of women in leadership positions in higher education.
- I Produce development materials to support women's career development.

04 Research methods

This project is based on qualitative research methods designed to explore mid-career academic women's plans, aspirations and experiences. We interviewed 30 academic women from a variety of institutions who self-identified as being at the 'mid-career' stage. In this section of the report, we outline our target group and our sample, and explain our approach to interviewing and analysis.

Our target group – why mid-career?

In considering women's academic careers and gender imbalances, research has tended to focus on academic women who are early-career researchers (eg, Cole & Gunter, 2010) or those who are in senior and leadership positions (eg, Fitzgerald, 2014; Hoskins, 2012; Dean et al, 2009; Doherty & Manfredi, 2006). Valuable as this research is, it is also important to explore the experiences and perspectives of women who see themselves as being mid-career, particularly as this stage probably encompasses the longest period of most women's working lives. It may often be at the mid-career stage

that women are thinking about promotion and leadership, or that they feel demotivated, blocked or 'stuck'. Increasingly, professional women tend to have children at a later age, meaning that mid-career coincides with a time when academic women are most likely to have young children or to be considering starting a family.

For all of these reasons, mid-career women are in a particularly challenging and interesting position in terms of their career plans and aspirations.

We recognise that the concept of mid-career is open to interpretation, and may feel different for individuals depending on their discipline, institution, confidence levels and other factors. For this reason, we invited women who self-defined as being mid-career to volunteer for this study. As part of the interviews, we asked women what mid-career meant to them, and we discuss the 'neglected mid-career stage' later in the report. The majority of women who volunteered to take part in our study, self-defining as mid-career, were employed as lecturers, senior lecturers, senior research fellows and readers. That a handful of women professors,

PhD students and post-doctoral researchers also volunteered to take part perhaps demonstrates the breadth of the term 'mid-career'.

Recruiting and selecting participants

We recruited 30 women to take part in concept-map mediated interviews (see below). Aiming to speak to mid-career academic women from a diverse range of institutions and disciplines, we sent a recruitment email to a variety of institutional and discipline-specific mailing lists. We invited anyone who self-defined as a mid-career academic woman, working in a London university, to take part. We had positive responses from 60 women, of whom we selected 30 on a semi-random basis to maximise the diversity of institutions, disciplines and mid-career job roles. The 30 women we eventually interviewed were from nine different London institutions (including Russell Group, and pre- and post-1992 universities). They held a variety of job roles (lecturer, senior lecturer, reader, research associate, senior research fellow, senior investigator and interim school director). Participants were from at least 17 different disciplines, with natural sciences represented more heavily than social sciences, arts and humanities. While some of the research participants were from ethnic minority backgrounds, most were white, and further research would be needed to explore the career experiences of black and minority ethnic women in more detail. Appendix 1 shows the discipline, job role, nationality and ethnicity of participants.

While we recognise that the sample size can give only indicative results, and may be particularly limited in terms of drawing conclusions in relation to sub-groups (such as women in certain disciplines or from particular cultural backgrounds), the detail of the interviews and analysis nevertheless contribute to a valuable understanding of mid-career academic women's careers and decision-making.

Data collection

We collected data through concept-map mediated interviews (Kandiko & Kinchin, 2012; 2013). These were qualitative interviews that began with a request to participants to map out where they would like to see their career in five to 10 years' time. Concept maps are a method of graphic organisation that can illustrate networks and links between themes. In practice, women drew a variety of visual representations of their future

careers, some of which are included in this report. We then asked women to explain their maps, highlighting what they felt would help them to achieve their aspirations, and to share any good practice they had experienced and discuss the barriers they faced. We also asked participants about what was valued in academic life, whether (and how) women communicate their successes, and whether (and how) gender and other social identities play a role. We finished each interview with a discussion of what being mid-career meant to the participants. We carried out 30 concept-map mediated interviews of around one hour each in October and November 2014. Interviews were audio recorded with the interviewees' permission, and the recordings were transcribed.

Ethics

The recruitment email emphasised that participants' responses would be kept confidential, and that interview excerpts would be anonymised in any publication or report by removing names, institutional affiliation and other identifying details. Thus, all the research participant names used in our reports are pseudonyms. Participants were sent an information sheet in advance, and asked to sign a consent form in which they agreed to the interview being recorded and subsequent data being stored. They were informed that they could choose to withdraw from the research up to the end of 2014. The project received institutional ethical approval from King's College London (reference REP/13/14-61).

Analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out, drawing on participants' concept maps and the transcripts of their interviews. Analytical codes were initially developed after interviewing was completed. The research team drew on participants' concept maps to create our own analytical concept map, which identified emergent themes and tentatively linked some of these themes together. Interview transcripts were then coded using NVivo qualitative analysis software, with new codes being added as necessary. While coding each interview transcript, each interviewee's concept map was consulted together with their transcript. Codes and analytical decisions were discussed iteratively amongst the three members of the research team. ■

05

Key findings

In this section, we share our key findings from the study. These are necessarily an introduction to only some of the many issues that were discussed and reflected on, often in great depth, by our research participants. Although this was a small research project, the rich data suggests many potential areas for development and scope for academic articles and policy reports on specific issues. This section, then, can only begin to unpick some of the complex issues around mid-career academic women's plans, aspirations and experiences. For the purposes of this report, we have summarised our key findings under four key themes as follows:

- I The neglected mid-career stage. Mid-career is a lengthy stage of academic careers, which is often neglected due to a focus on early-career researchers and senior leaders. It is particularly important for women at this stage to receive support with their career development.
- I Career planning: strategy and opportunity. Academic women have multiple and varied approaches to career planning, and tend to take an individual approach to it. Some have strategic and organised plans, whereas others feel confused or 'stuck', often blaming themselves or communicating a sense of failure.

- I Gendered motivation and prestige. Women are motivated by diverse factors, some of which map onto what is valued and considered prestigious in academic life, while others are less recognised institutionally. Many of the women we interviewed felt uncomfortable about engaging in self-promotion and communicating their successes.
- I Children, caring and work-life balance. Many women's careers are strategically planned and organised around existing and expected responsibilities for children and other relatives. While barriers to women's career development should not be equated to childcare, this continues to be an important and highly gendered factor for many.

Each of these themes is discussed in more detail.



The neglected mid-career stage

Embarking on this research, we knew we wanted to speak to women who were neither in the most senior positions, nor in the earliest stages of their academic career. Beyond this, we invited women who self-defined as being 'mid-career' to take part in the research, and we were keen to gather their definitions and experiences of 'mid-career'. In the interviews, mid-career was understood as an intersection of seniority, age and perceived competence. For many of the women we spoke to, identifying themselves as mid-career signalled an intention to aspire to more senior positions:

Beth *I'm not a professor yet and I'm in my mid-40s so I'm halfway between my PhD and retiring so that's why I think I'm, kind of, mid-career. So I'm hoping to move to the next stage soon.*

Kay *I've gained a lot of experience and knowledge and exposure to being an academic but I've also got quite a long way to go and a lot to learn still... I feel like I'm in the middle. I feel like I kind of – I'm at the top of a mountain but I've got maybe another steep one to climb.*

Most women saw the mid-career stage as fluid and diverse. Job titles did not necessarily map neatly onto early-, mid- or late career stages. Neither was there a precise age at which mid-career began and finished: this depended on factors such as career breaks, and whether academia was a first or subsequent career:

Eve *I think terms like early-career, mid-career, I suppose they're quite neutral... maybe you did your PhD late because you did another career first or something. There are assumptions about what ages you should be at which of those and yet, actually, if you look around, there's lots of people who don't fit that... There's a huge spectrum of what might count between early and late... Lots of different trajectories that people will have followed and they can't possibly be lumped into one category.*

There were also emotional elements involved in being mid-career. Being mid-career often coincided with feelings of growing skills and confidence:

Beth *I was promoted from a lectureship to a reader... I feel more confident because when I was a lecturer... I wasn't very confident... I always thought, am I good enough for this? So I always doubted myself but now I've sort of thought, well okay, I have achieved all of this, you know, maybe I am okay at this job... Yes, it's been more enjoyable than the very early years which were a struggle.*

In contrast, others felt frustrated and unsure of how to assess their own competence, having moved away from an early career position where feedback is readily given, while not yet being recognised internationally:

Alex *Mid-career, to me, it's a very difficult position, where you're never good enough but you also don't have someone senior who can praise you without sounding patronising... you don't get that praise and you also don't yet have that world recognition.*

Perhaps for this reason, mid-career can bring feelings of insecurity. For some, insecurity was a structural fact; several of the mid-career women we spoke to did not have permanent contracts, even though many were very experienced and held fairly senior posts at higher salary scales:

Dee *I suspect probably – I would probably be actually on the upper end of mid-career in terms of my position. But for me I still feel mid-career because I don't have a permanent job, and so that insecurity means that I still don't feel established.*

Others had permanent contracts and yet still felt insecure, surmising that mid-career was not somewhere they could expect to stay, even if they wanted to. Some interviewees shared anecdotal evidence of former colleagues who had left or had been 'pushed out':

Valerie *We are in this middle position, we have been here a long time, we have a lot of experience, we are expensive. And we are not lab heads. So I think for the institution we are a bit of a waste. They would rather have a lab head and then people on a few years' contract. So you don't feel valued in your position because it's very clear that academically you've failed. And you are borderline 'not wanted' by the institution.*

Valerie's¹ account is interesting because of its reference to the cost of mid-career academics to the institution. Several women we interviewed were at or near the top of the pay scale, whereas Valerie suggests that academic institutions prefer to employ senior people on permanent contracts and then short-term staff at more junior and middle levels. It is striking that Valerie talks of being seen as 'a bit of a waste', 'failed', 'not valued' and 'not wanted'. It seems that it is difficult for women, particularly in some disciplines, to remain in mid-career in the long term.

In contrast, there are women who are highly ambitious and strategic; for them, mid-career is a time of career-building, a transition from early-career status to established academic. Although these women portrayed themselves as confident and competent, there were still insecurities involved, in that mid-career was seen as a time of 'make or break' with all the attendant pressures:

Wendy *It's a really fundamental time. It could go... either way. If you're lucky and I continue to want to do it, and I still do, I still am passionate about it, I'll make it... But as I said, I think I've got five years in which to make it. And if that doesn't happen then I need to seriously reassess. [Interviewer: 'Really, it's that vital?'] Yes, it really is make or break and I know I'm not alone in that way of thinking.*

Finally, some of the women clearly identified mid-career as a path towards seniority and leadership, with some employing metaphors from the business world to express this:

Diane *You're not right up at the table making decisions. That for me feels like mid-career. You have a leadership role... you've moved from management to leadership, but you aren't at the top table. So I suppose it's sub-board level, but I want to be at board level.*

Our evidence suggests that mid-career is a vital stage when women are closely considering their career development. It is also a complex and fluid stage. For many, it may be the time during which they are likely to have children or to care for elderly relatives, further complicating (and perhaps prolonging) their experience of this 'mid' part of their careers. For some, it may coincide with a period of questioning whether an academic career is 'worth it':

Alex *Many people of my age, that's 40, that boundary where you start thinking, is this really worth it? Do I really want to continue working so hard and being so exhausted all the time? And I see the professors above me, most of them female, working all the time and so the question is, do I want to become like that or not? And it is a point where a lot of women leave academia.*

As we suggest later, mid-career women need particular consideration and support in terms of their career development. It is also important, however, to remember that many women will spend most of their careers at the 'mid' stage, and that statistically, it is inevitable that many will never secure senior positions. As we recommend later, this suggests that academics need to be valued not only for their potential to undertake leadership and senior positions, but also for their current contribution. Career development may not only be a case of being promoted, but also of developing new directions and new ideas. ■

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participants' confidentiality.

Career planning: strategy and opportunity

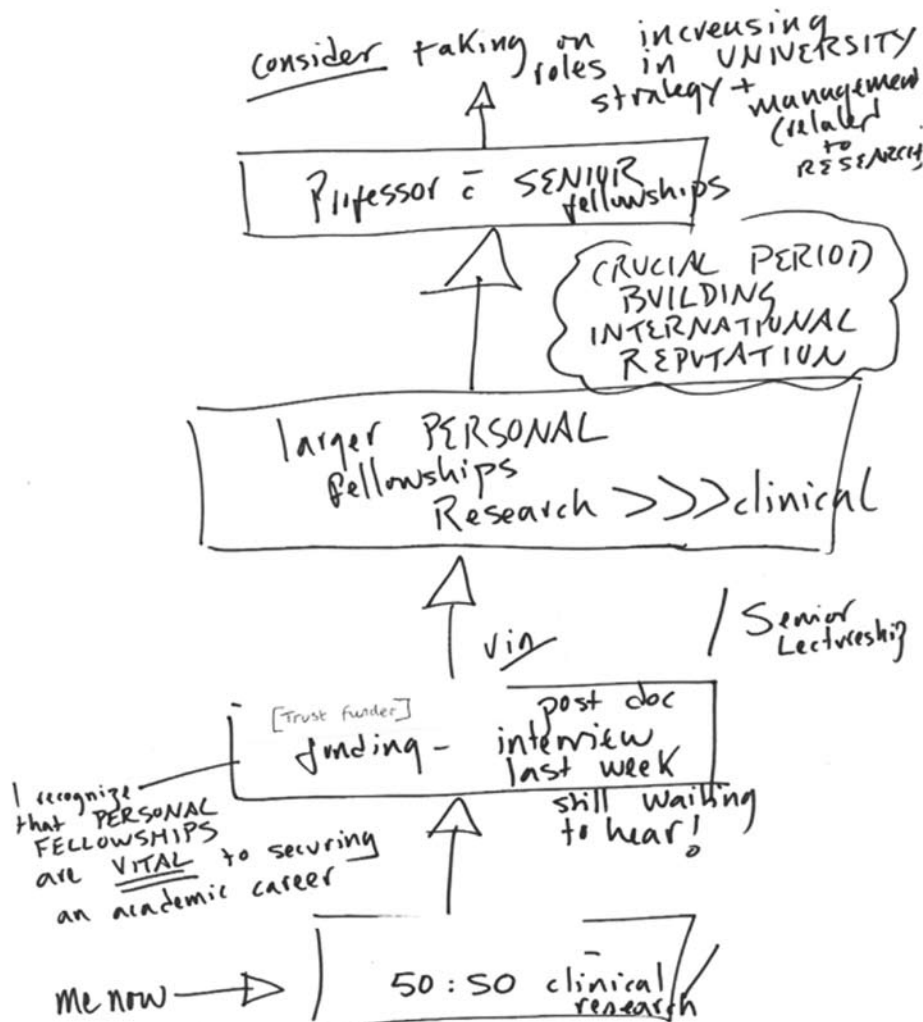
We asked the women in our research to draw a concept map or diagram illustrating where they hoped to see their career in five to 10 years' time. These concept maps showed large variations in the approaches to career planning. Some were detailed and clear, showing specific, measurable and timed objectives that led logically towards short-, medium- and long-term goals. These women knew where they were going, and knew what they needed to do to get there. They represented themselves as assured planners with clear and often ambitious career paths, who felt that active career planning was a vital part of taking control of their lives:

Fiona

The question is: do you go for the really professor route where you're staying research active, or do you go down the management route? And I think that is the decision that gets made at this stage. And I guess I'm really keen that I make it, rather than it just kind of happening by default.

The concept maps drawn by our interviewees gave clear and contrasting representations of their career plans. Wendy's concept map (Figure 1) shows her clear intention and hope to become a senior lecturer, then a professor, and eventually taking on strategic and managerial roles. She has mapped out how she will get there (via personal fellowships and a 'crucial period' spent building her international reputation). The form as well as content of Wendy's concept map show clear upward progression.

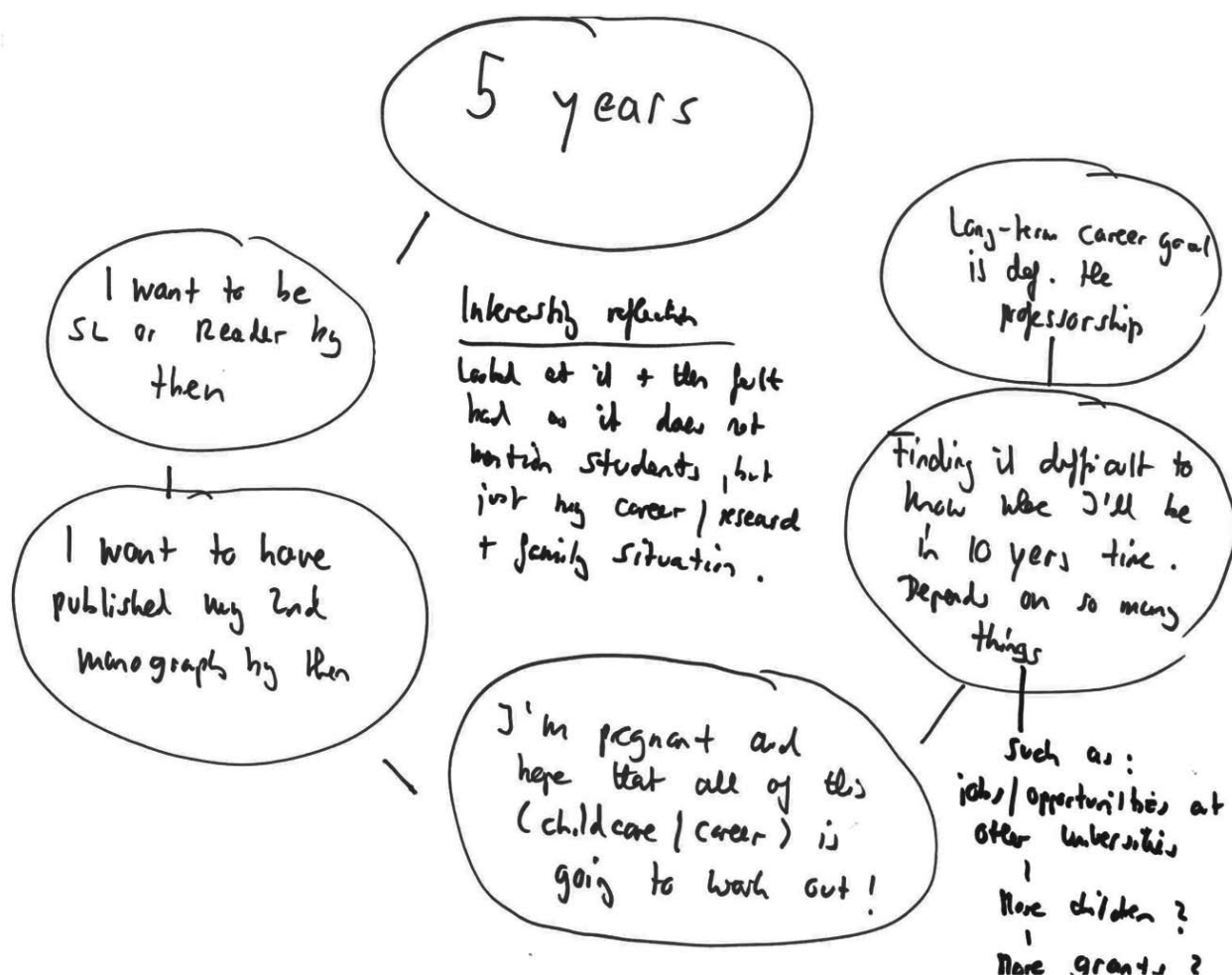
Figure 1: Wendy's concept map



Even for the most committed planners, however, five- to 10-year plans could never be entirely predictable. They depended on a number of factors, including publications, job opportunities in other institutions, colleagues, grant income and family. Bernadette's concept map (Figure 2) is similar to Wendy's in that it shows an intention to become a senior lecturer and then professor via a clear route of publishing and grants; however, its form and content are less assured, and more circular and reflective:

Bernadette *So, in five years' time, I want to be senior lecturer or reader... I want to publish my second monograph, I'm writing the book proposal for that now. That's to do with my second independent research project, big research project, after the PhD so that will feel nice. Big news is I'm pregnant... I hope that all of this is going to work out, childcare and career and so on... I'm finding it difficult to know where I'll be in 10 years' time, it depends on so many things, such as job opportunities at other universities. Sometimes it's easier to get promoted if you just change institution a lot of the time; whether I'd have more children, whether I get more research grants. And long-term career goal is definitely the professorship.*

Figure 2: Bernadette's concept map



Bernadette's map and discussion seem to signal some discomfort around the notion of being a 'good' career planner. Some of the women who had clear career goals and paths seemed almost to apologise for, or downplay, their careful planning:

Beth *I deliberately collaborated with people abroad and published papers with overseas collaborators to show international reputation and collaboration. I deliberately went for a large lecture course to the core of the students... I suppose it was strategic. Well, not that much, you know... it's rushing to juggle everything, really.*

Perhaps being a strategic and ambitious planner sits uncomfortably with other aspects of gendered and professionalised identities. In terms of gender, feminine 'norms' suggest a certain amount of modesty that conflicts with what might be seen as self-promotion. In addition, there may be conflicts between strategic career planning and the pursuit of academic values that emphasise the pursuit of knowledge, and often a notion of collaborative or collegiate working rather than personal ambition and progression:

Bernadette *I derive pleasure and satisfaction and fulfillment from excelling in that and doing it well, which means I'm playing the game, you know, in terms of participating in the [Research Excellence Framework], those kinds of things, which I also despise politically. But that is, I think, honestly, a part of it. I'd lie if I said it wasn't.*

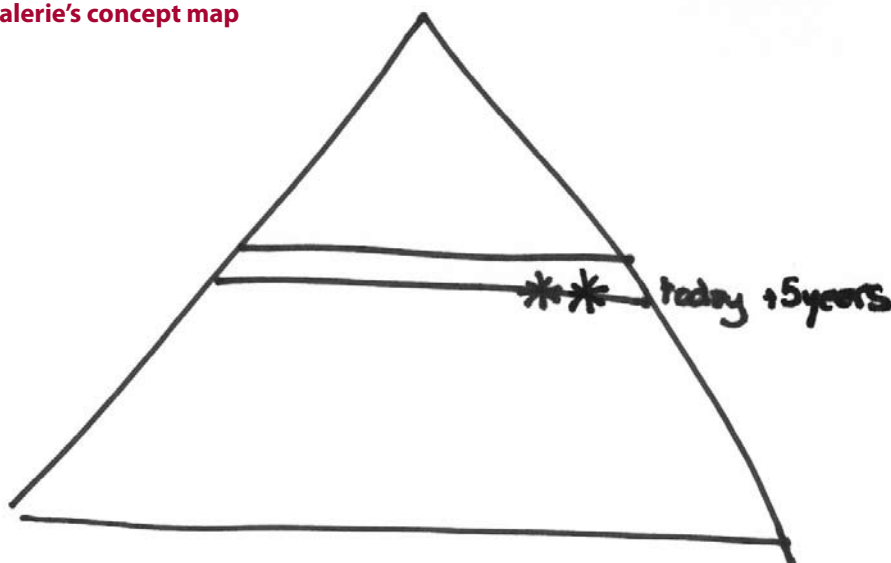
For other women, whose approach to career planning had been more opportunistic, their reluctance to engage in career planning meant that they had not been promoted as quickly as they might have been capable of:

Yvonne *I didn't bother applying for academic promotion for a very long time. And it never occurred to me that it was important. I always used to think, well listen, it doesn't really matter whether I'm a senior lecturer, a reader or a professor. It's the quality of my work that matters and I don't really care... And then only latterly it occurred to me... that I should have been promoted a long time ago and it would be a good idea. Because I was going to meetings where I would be the only person on the panel who's not a professor... And when I did the promotion to reader, I realised that I probably met the criteria quite a bit previously.*

In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the interviewees drew concept maps that suggested a lack of clarity over career plans, even reflecting feelings of confusion and frustration. One woman drew a striking visual representation of herself in the middle of a pyramid, unable to progress towards the tip of the pyramid (where there is less space), and drawing two closely adjacent crosses to represent herself now and in five years' time (Figure 3):

Valerie *I have drawn a pyramid because it's clearly the way you see a selection process and people that are of the capacity to get to the top. And it's a progression to more excellence, more experience. And I feel like by now I'm in a middle sort of position. It took me a lot of work to get here and I'm very happy, because the kind of position I've got today is something I did aspire for when I was younger... Now that I am here and I still have many years in front of me I would like to do more. But I feel myself stuck for different reasons... And to be perfectly honest, and not criticising the system but mainly myself, I don't see myself going that much upward in the next five years. Which I wouldn't tell anybody of course... I like to think I would like to have my lab, but I'm not sure because this is scary, it looks very competitive, it looks very hard... I don't have... official recognition, I am not in charge and I don't have enough responsibilities. And sometimes it really weighs on me. Yes. I feel very frustrated sometimes.*

Figure 3: Valerie's concept map



In Valerie's account, the individual nature of women's academic career planning comes across strongly: 'not criticising the system but mainly myself, I don't see myself going that much upward in the next five years. Which I wouldn't tell anybody of course'. Women who do not progress quickly might blame themselves, and feel unable even to discuss their difficulties. The word 'stuck' came up in several accounts, at times as a cautionary word or spur to prompt more active engagement in career planning or job-seeking:

Pat *I took the senior lecturer's job, which I've loved... it's a permanent contract, I do like that mixture of teaching and research... it is relatively easy to get to and having to be home to do the dinner and pick them up from after-school clubs... I think I always thought maybe I've missed out on something, do you know, because there's a necessity to stay in the job and I see colleagues moving around doing other things, and I do feel a bit like, oh, I'm a bit stuck here, which was fine because, you know, I was bringing up my sons, but in the last couple of years, they're... now my children are 19 and 22... they don't need me to come home and help with homework and whatever.*

While mid-career women (or at least those who took part in our study) generally identified their need to engage actively in career planning, this should not imply that women's careers must take a particular path. While nearly all the participants had wishes and hopes for how their careers would look in five to 10 years' time, not all these aspirations were related to formal promotions or leadership positions. Some simply wanted a slight change in balance rather than seeking a high-status role:

Amanda *Where do I see myself being? I think very much still teaching, so not [moving] completely away from teaching, but along those lines with more choice and less [of] the donkey work, as it were. Donkey work being lots of marking. I'd like to have a bit more cross-school contact and work with people from other schools, to have a bit of influence at higher levels in the future development of [the university]... And some staff management. So no major ambitions there, but these are the sorts of directions in which I can see myself moving in the five- to 10-year period.*

Olivia *It's a bit odd because I am quite ambitious in many ways but I've never, I don't want to just have status for the sake of it. I can't see the point... That doesn't do it for me.*

Overall, women's approaches to career planning were enormously varied, as might be expected. At the mid-career stage, women are often actively engaged in contemplating their careers, and have a complex set of considerations to take into account when doing so, encompassing emotions, values and family commitments as well as the more formal aspects of promotions criteria, job opportunities, grant applications and prestigious publications. Their aspirations change depending on these considerations, and career plans are sometimes put on hold, slowed down or accelerated at different times.

For this reason, we need to be cautious in making generalisations about what mid-career academic women need and want in terms of career development. At times, they may need encouragement, a 'push' or simply a lack of barriers in order to aspire to the next level. At other times, they may need to be valued for their current work without any implied or explicit pressure to aim for more prestigious roles. It is also important to think further about the individualistic nature of academic careers. This individualism exacerbates the sense of having to be ambitious, to strategise and make plans, and to juggle everything. It also reinforces the belief that it is the responsibility of the individual as to whether progression is achieved or not, thus downplaying the role of structural inequalities and barriers that are related to gender, class, 'race' and ethnicity.

Perhaps what is most important is that mid-career academic women are given regular space, encouragement and support to assess their career goals and aspirations as they change and develop. Women should not be pigeonholed as being either ambitious or not, as they are very likely to change their priorities at different times, and need to be supported in their current roles as well as in their plans to develop themselves and aspire to new roles. ■

Gendered motivation and prestige

As mentioned earlier, this research builds on previous research that explores the gendered nature of the 'prestige economy' in universities (Coate & Kandiko Howson, 2014). However, we also wanted to ask interviewees more generally about what they valued in academic life, as well as what was valued by their institutions. When discussing what they valued, their answers tended to focus on traditional academic values such as the love of science, learning and the pursuit of knowledge, alongside other aspects such as good working environments, flexibility, autonomy and making a wider contribution:

Beth *I like doing the physics research, contributing to the advancement of knowledge in my field, that's what I like. I also like the people I'm surrounded by, I like the environment, so lots of interesting discussions. That's what I value; so the research and the people.*

Dee *Work-life balance is important, so being able to leave early some days, being trusted that you will get the job done is really lovely. Having a sense of purpose is brilliant, so being able to think that the work you're doing is going somewhere and going to do something useful, that's really important. And I love working here. I love the fact that everyone's incredibly motivated and wants to make a difference and is really lovely.*

It was notable that these and other women we interviewed tended to feel positive about their academic careers, even if they encountered difficulties. However, the aspects that they valued contrasted at times with what they perceived as being prestigious or highly valued by their departments, institutions and academic fields. As might be expected, the interviewees perceived high-status publications and substantial grant income to constitute prestige in the university. Other indicators of prestige included being invited to give keynote speeches at international conferences, editing journals and supervising PhD students. Prestige is a gendered concept, and this research contributes to evidence that women find it harder to access the types of currency that advance their reputations (Coate & Kandiko Howson, 2014).

Women were not necessarily opposed to all aspects of the prestige economy that operates in academia. High-profile publications and grant income were the clear parameters by which interviewees knew they would be judged, and those who were ambitious were under no illusions that they needed to achieve highly according to these indicators. Teaching, on the other hand, was widely considered non-prestigious:

Indira *If you get... [a] large amount of funding monetarily, that's considered prestigious... Where you publish is still considered, so Nature, Cell and Science, people will give prestige on that. You don't really get very much credit for teaching, and it's not considered prestigious particularly, it's just something that people say you need to do, and I think it should be given more prestige. Whether you sit on panels and whether you're invited to give presentations at big meetings, that's considered prestigious. But yeah, I'd say it's the papers and the grant income, still.*

Many interviewees told us that their institutions valued monetary income above all else. For some, this meant they lacked confidence in their chances of future success as academics:

Janeru *The most important part is money, so how much grant you can bring into the group, that is the crucial thing. So obviously I'm not that successful at that part.*

High-profile publications were considered both prestigious and necessary for a successful academic career, as well as being understood as a route to funding:

Valerie *Publication is the first thing because publication is the key to everything else. You can value people if they can bring money and they can bring money if they have adequate publication and their grant application was successful. So the scientific publication, whatever happens, is always at the base of your success.*

However, not all income-related activity was considered prestigious. Research-related income was clearly more prestigious than income from students, and working with undergraduates – who may be seen as the most lucrative group – was widely considered the least prestigious form of teaching:

Amanda *There are people who are very student focused, with concern to do the right thing for students and look after students, and people who are not, and the people who are not obviously have a great deal more time to spend forwarding their careers... In some ways it would be nice if there were slightly stronger expectations placed that everybody would do their bit.*

Monique *A lot of people do a lot of work in terms of, yes, teaching and caring for students, and some others get away with nothing and progressing with their career. And I think this is a common feeling [among] quite a number of staff around here.*

These aspects are clearly gendered, and recognised as such by interviewees:

Diane *Education is women's work at [institution]... That's not what serious academics do around here. Serious academics do other things. They don't really do teaching... It's definitely prized here, but it is woman's work.*

So-called 'serious academics' were seen to focus on research and other work that would be recognised as prestigious. This seemed to mirror the gendered division of labour in the home, where necessary and under-rewarded labour (childcare and housework, and teaching and repetitive lab work or data entry in the university) is done more often by women, thus 'freeing up' others (mostly men) for 'successful' and prestigious forms of work.

In this way, the prestige economy operates to reward certain forms of labour while ignoring or undervaluing others. In addition, the currency carried by different indicators of esteem was not always equal when possessed by men and women. When women attempted to play the prestige game, they did not always feel they were as readily recognised as men were:

Eve *Men and women who do the same things, the men accrue prestige and the women don't. So writing books... sitting on advisory committees... to give plenary talks at conferences... and also getting money. So getting large grants... The men who get those things get more prestige than the women who have done exactly the same... And, you know, although it's secret, I am sure they get paid more... I actually think I seek that kind of thing to some extent... I like it when I'm invited to sit on an advisory committee... so I went to give an opening talk at a conference. I do feel validated by that... I'm increasingly invited to sit and do quite high-profile things. I don't think anyone in my department's noticed.*

Several women mentioned that their achievements were not always noticed in their institutions, and they felt this was gendered. Ethnicity, 'race' and background are also likely to affect how experiences and achievements are valued; one academic woman attending an event where we shared our research findings noted that women from the Global South² often have a wealth of experience and qualifications that are not adequately valued or recognised in the UK's academic job market.

The lack of value given to the achievements of women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds could be related to a lack of self-promotion. Our research confirmed other research that suggests a cultural and gendered reluctance to engage in self-promotional activities (see Scharff, forthcoming):

Haruka *Well the thing is I'm not a sort of self-promoting person, it's not in my character. Maybe that is why I am maybe ignored in a way... I've really published but I don't talk about it... Maybe that's something there where I should be more tactical about making an impact.*

² The Global South is generally thought of as consisting of the nations of Africa, Central America, Latin America and most of Asia, considered collectively.

Lara *People don't want to talk about being the best or, you know, oh, 'I'm the de de de de. I got an award for de de de de'. It's like, don't boast about it, you know... it's kind of, like, that British mentality, isn't it? You know, let's not shout about how great we are.*

Janeru *Japanese women are brought up to be modest, but in the academic world you have to be, you know, present [that] you're very good, which I'm not really good at doing so far. So to say I'm reasonably good, I have to achieve much more.*

However, this should not suggest that women should become 'more like men' in selling their achievements. While women's career development schemes often include an element of encouraging women to be better at self-promotion, some women in our study questioned whether this was healthy for academia:

Tess *When people get new grants or have a Nature paper published you're all summoned to a room with a bottle of champagne. And you toast that person's success. And sometimes I think between colleagues that's genuine, and sometimes that's forced and slightly tinged with envy and all of it. I think it's slightly false in every situation, that kind of thing, sometimes. But that type of thing, that's the thing that's feted rather than student feedback.*

This is a particularly important point at a time when it seems that academia is becoming more dependent on cultures of self-promotion. Academics are increasingly required to be entrepreneurs and to measure and prove their progress against varying goals, as Stephen Ball (2012) suggests:

"Last year's efforts are a benchmark for improvement – more publications, more research grants, more students. We must keep up; strive to achieve the new and very more diverse targets which we set for ourselves in appraisal meetings; confess and confront our weaknesses; undertake appropriate and value-enhancing professional development; and take up opportunities for making ourselves more productive." (Ball, 2012:19)

This critique was confirmed by a feeling among some interviewees that the goalposts keep moving; that what is valued by certain institutions is not consistent, but changes frequently according to economic and policy factors:

Abby *One year they'll say they value bringing in research money, but then if you bring in research money they'll say, 'oh, no, actually what we value is bringing in students', and then if you bring in students they'll say, 'actually what we value is publications'... What I value is being a good teacher, you know, doing solid research, but... I don't think that's valued here.*

Even some of those who felt they had been relatively successful in 'playing the game' were critical of what counts as valued and prestigious:

Bernadette *I play the [Research Excellence Framework] game, I play the publication game, I play the getting grants game, definitely, but I think that it's really important to be collegial and I don't always see that, and that really annoys me. And I'm not sure to what extent collegiality is really fostered or valued, especially if it comes to things like stepping in for teaching, you know, things that aren't research, that are meant to count... My first single thought was whatever men do, white men, is prestigious... and some men might also struggle with that who don't play that game, and some women might do incredibly well who play that game.*

As Bernadette points out, the willingness to self-promote and 'play the game' is gendered and yet this should not suggest that 'all women' are modest while 'all men' sell themselves. The reality is more complicated, with many women engaging in self-promotion and doing well in the prestige economy. What we suggest here is that it is not sufficient to 'train' women to be better at 'playing the game', even if this might be necessary to tackle glaring inequalities at senior levels. It is also important for academic institutions to reconsider what is – and what is not – considered prestigious:

Monique *I thought university was about something a little bit different; about sharing knowledge and being curious and, you know, making discoveries and all of that and, you know, sort of – well, higher aims. And it seems to be more and more today about just getting money, and even getting, yes, products out, rather than knowledge perhaps.*

Olivia *I don't mind publishing papers and I have had pretty good publications. But I don't actually care about it. I do care, but who cares? No one ever reads them... That's not a way to get your research out there and that's the way you're judged and I find that quite upsetting. That's not impact, you know. You're judged by your grant income and you're judged by the number of papers you've got out and then they judge you on the impact factor of those papers and the number of times they're cited and I just don't care about that, and it's difficult to see myself long term in a career where I'm judged on things that don't matter to me.*

In particular, institutions and departments should think about how they can properly celebrate and reward activities that are attached to collective values – such as teaching, education and outreach:

Elaine *I spend a lot of my time talking to people... writing reports for governments, you know, doing [that] kind of advocacy work... and that doesn't count. I don't get publication out of that. I don't get grants out of that. It takes a huge amount of time. It takes a lot of energy as well, and it's absolutely counted for nothing in an academic environment. But to me it's the most important thing, because if we're trying to achieve the goal of providing services for people that don't have them, that is the most important thing to do.*

It was clear that a number of women found it frustrating that the types of things that motivated them in their work were the least likely to be those that receive recognition and reward. Women sometimes had very ambivalent feelings about prestige and reward, especially if they were able to accrue it while wanting to downplay its importance. ■

Children, caring and work–life balance

In a study on mid-career academic women, it is hardly surprising that childcare figured highly for interviewees when thinking about their future plans. We do not want to generalise or simplify here; after all, not all academic women are parents, not all of our research participants planned or wanted to have children, and not all mothers are the main child-carers. Work–life balance was important for all of the women we identified, including those for whom parenthood was not a factor. However, for women with children and/or ill and disabled relatives, and for those who expected to have caring commitments in the future, career development was always understood in this context.

Many of the women we interviewed had sophisticated methods of balancing their family and work lives, and their reflections in this area could easily merit an entire report. Several of the participants had negotiated flexible working in the form of working from home or working part time:

Kay *You know usually on the days I'm in London I walk in the door on average about 8pm when [my son]'s just going to sleep... I have negotiated two days at home and... I take him to school, that's my main thing that I [love] with him, you know? So on those days, you know I have that contact with that teacher and they've seen me and I've taken him to the playground and he loves it... He calls them his 'mummy days'; 'is it mummy day today?'... I'm back at my desk at 9:10... But I had to fight for that... It just wasn't something that was negotiable for me.*

Although some women had needed to fight for flexible working arrangements, others benefited from policies to improve women's representation, particularly in the sciences through the Athena SWAN agenda.³ As well as enabling employees to work flexibly, these arrangements often meant that carers were not required to work outside core hours:

Diane *We don't have meetings in half term. We don't have meetings outside of core hours. People who go on maternity leave can choose to either take a sabbatical from their teaching or their research work for the first term. Those kinds of things that you're made to do as part of an Athena SWAN self-assessment exercise and an action plan have a huge impact.*

Carol *I said, 'I can do teaching between 9 and 3. At 3:30 I have to leave'... that has really made my life much easier.*

Despite these improvements, however, many women emphasised how motherhood had a significant impact on their careers. Several of the interviewees accepted part of this impact as inevitable:

Elaine *How [can] you have two years off work, or however many years you have off, and it not affect your work? Because the minimum that happens is you stop working, so you're two years behind everyone else... I don't regret it for a second, but it would be silly to think that it wouldn't negatively affect it... you have to just find strategies to work around it and make the best of the situation.*

Whether or not 'falling behind' is inevitable, the acceleration of academic work – combined with the 'prestige indicators' that are required if one is to progress – seems likely to intensify the disadvantage for women with caring responsibilities:

Alex *I think a lot of women are extremely exhausted and they work all kinds of crazy hours. And I'm not sure if that's exclusive to academia. But I think the always-on culture is very difficult in particular now with smart phones. There are advantages because you can reply to your emails in between, but kids do complain... 'Put down that phone!'*

Dee *I have a 17-month old baby and so not wanting to commit 100 hours a week to work is always going to take away from potential career progression because there will always be people working harder than you are. But that's not necessarily a gender thing, that's just a time of your life thing.*

There are at least two aspects here that require further consideration. First, why would '100 hours a week' be considered reasonable or necessary? Second, if this is a 'time of your life thing' rather than 'a gender thing', why did most of the women in this study – many of whom had partners whom they described as supportive – feel that being a mother in particular, rather than a parent in general, was very likely to hold back their career? Caring responsibilities remain intensely gendered, and the women in this study felt tremendous pressure to be good mothers and carers as well as successful academics:

Alex *And women do end up waking up more at night – however you want to say it... That is just what happens. Particularly academic women who want to do everything perfectly and breastfeed forever and wake up forever and who want to be it all. And being a little bit of a perfectionist is probably what got you into academia, but it can also be your downfall.*

Gina *My partner became disabled about two years ago, and can't work... and I have been very happy to be working full time because it's actually a bit of a break to get out of the house. But I also think I'm aware, or just slightly in the background I'm thinking, are people judging me for not, you know, being at home a bit more with [my partner], and they may not be judging a bloke in the same way.*

Janeru *My father became ill, and now my mum is seriously ill, and we have to go back to Japan quite soon to take care of her. I don't know [if] that is a woman's role, but they expect women to do this kind of thing... fortunately [the] British are much more flexible about this, taking care of [family members who are ill], compared to Japanese society, so even though I take care of these ill family [members] in Japan, I can come back to my career, but obviously it damages the progression.*

Bernadette *Obviously, having a supportive partner who takes, you know, who does the childcare, we have to see how that works out in reality... but I am still not under any illusion that it's still mainly a woman's work to raise children and the structures are such if you are an academic and a bit more flexible, I'm sure I'd be the one who stays at home.*

Where women were able to negotiate part-time employment or working from home, they appreciated the flexibility but often found that they started to feel invisible in the workplace or were left out:

Gina *I suddenly realised that working from home makes you very... makes you very invisible. So I've been at [institution] for 11 years, and I thought, nobody there knows who I am, and I don't know who anyone is except for my line manager, and sometimes a couple of colleagues, if I was doing something with other researchers, which I wasn't, a lot of the time. So yes, so you become invisible. So you don't do all that networking. I also think that I was not credited enough... wasn't given shared authorship and so on and so forth by my line manager, and I didn't think to ask for it. Again, because I was quite isolated.*

Beth *For the last 12 years I've worked 75 per cent time so I just wasn't around. I wasn't around enough so I was left out of things, I was never invited onto committees because people always thought, oh, you're so busy, you're rushing around; it was because I was trying to fit my entire job into shorter working hours. So I wasn't asked to be on committees and I didn't put myself forward because I was just trying to get the core of my job done.*

As Beth's child has grown older and does not need so much care, she is now reviewing her aspirations as she is able to commit to more at work. However, she still experiences barriers such as the expectations on her to travel, and the gendered norms of networking that have been noted elsewhere (Coate & Kandiko Howson, 2014).

Beth *A lot of the things which are judged are things which are difficult to do if you are looking after children. So I would say there is a bias there in the sense that it's hard to achieve those things if you're the main child-carer... It's all the external things, the things that involve travelling, the medals, prizes; that needs you to be on very close terms with a senior male colleague... I found that difficult because, you know, you don't just to go a pub for a drink with them... which I see the male colleagues doing. They have a different relationship. So that kind of close mentoring which might get you invited onto more things.*

Despite the problems that remain, it was encouraging to hear that in many institutions – particularly those engaged in Athena SWAN processes – workplace flexibility and anti-discriminatory practices were tangibly improving matters:

Beth *Instead of saying, 'what have you done in the last five years?'; they say, in the last, you know, 60 months of your work, so you go back further, they take account of that. And just the attitude in general... I couldn't tell anybody that I was part time... the group secretary didn't even know I was part time; I was scared to tell people because the moment you say it, then they assume you're not committed. But nowadays it's not an issue... people wouldn't judge you, and flexible working has come in so that people can work when they want to... It's a huge change.*

Nevertheless, even where such measures have been implemented, subtle levels of discrimination may remain:

Diane *We were in a meeting and... the person who's chairing the meeting said, 'is there anybody here who has caring responsibilities that means they can't stay after five o'clock?', and then went like that, like screwed up his face, as if to say, 'as if we really are going to stop the meeting at five o'clock'... Athena SWAN says no meetings [should] go on until five o'clock. People have caring responsibilities and he very carefully didn't say women, he said people. He didn't say children, he said caring but then the look on his face was like, 'but if you go that's pretty pathetic'.*

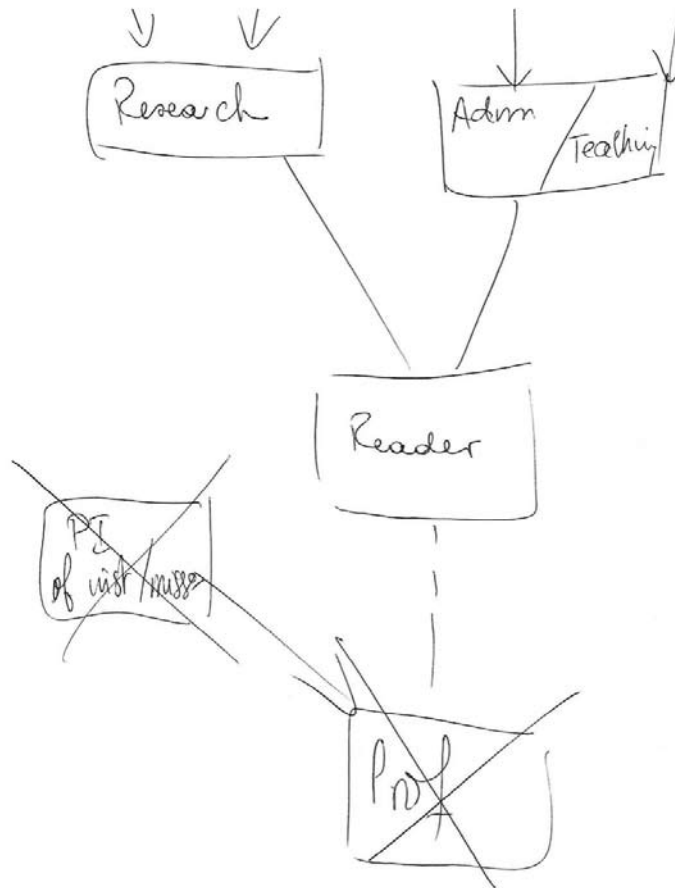
The overall feeling from many of the women with caring responsibilities was that it took a great deal of hard work, determination and strategising to combine caring with an academic career:

Beth *I've been to so many things over the years where people discuss career progression; what is it?... why are not more women coming through?... you have to be so determined to get through... I used to put my daughter to bed, you know, at 7 and then I'd work 'til 2 in the morning sometimes and I did that for years. You have to be extremely driven to do it because a lot of people will say, this is not worth it, you know.*

Difficult choices have to be made; for example, senior lecturer Carol decided that she could work towards being a reader but would go no further while caring for her children; she represented this strikingly on her concept map by writing 'Principal Investigator' and 'professor' and then crossing out these categories (Figure 4):

Carol *I'm a mother, so it's where it stops... I love research. I love teaching... but there is one moment where I said, 'that, I'm not going to take on board, because I'm a mother before being a researcher'.*

Figure 4: Carol's concept map (adapted)



Such barriers were intensified for women who were single mothers, and also for those who could not call on alternative financial resources. These barriers also relate to the prestige economy discussed previously; when caring for children, women might find the 'busy-ness of teaching and admin easier to deal with than conducting prestigious research and writing, and may need extra support and flexibility to identify the necessary time and space for research and writing. Alex gives a clear explanation of this:

Alex *The other thing that particularly affects mothers with young children is the academic writing, because this is one area where you need to sit down and be able to think. So a lot of women, or people, when you're very exhausted, you do the easy tasks. So a lot of women end up doing the teaching stuff or the managing stuff and organising and blah, blah, blah, which is not necessarily recognised. And at the end of the day, you say, what have I actually done? And it doesn't feel like you've done anything, but you've been very busy.... And people who have had either family money or a... wealthier partner can then go down to working one or two or three days a week and balance it better. But I think that's the challenge of living in London. I worked at 80 per cent for 10 months and then all my savings [were] gone. So that's not really feasible.*

Another important point is the impact of family commitments on academic mobility. In a culture where mobility between institutions and even countries is encouraged and seen as prestigious, caring responsibilities can prevent further progression:

Diane *So [working] somewhere else could be somewhere abroad but actually if my children are in university here or my parents are still dependent here, that's a big brake on things.*

Gina *Whatever I do has to be London-based, because of my family commitments. I'm not feeling able to spend a lot of time and money commuting, and certainly not able to live away from London... So I know there was something about this ultimate goal being ideal, not reality. Not realisable, actually, I think. London-based is about family really.*

Some women had found the opposite; that by prioritising their academic career and the need to travel, personal lives were interrupted or put on hold:

Silvia *I tend to delay all the big decisions... you never enter fully in life, in a way... I feel this particularly now because I moved... So all my life is still in Italy, let's say. My furniture, my home, and I feel I am still living in Italy but I am living here. So I started again the student-like life, which is not proper.*

We will conclude this section by quoting Kay, who celebrates the progress women have made in academia despite ongoing social inequalities, and Lara, who emphasises the satisfaction and fulfillment of combining motherhood and a career:

Kay *I think the way that what we're aspiring to do has evolved in the context of men not having to take primary responsibility for any dependants, whether that's elderly relatives or children. You know, and I think it's not changed very much and I think, you know, most women who manage to achieve are achieving against the odds and should be celebrated for more.*

Lara *I find my life is more fulfilling now than what it was. Because I used to work, like, 8 o'clock in the morning until 8 o'clock at night. And now I can work from 8:30pm until 6:00pm, and then it has to stop... I actually find that now I've got that balance I'm probably a happier person. ■*

06

Good practice recommendations

The following recommendations are based on our findings, drawing on examples of good practice that the women we identified had experienced, ideas they had for improved practice, and other possibilities arising from the research findings. These recommendations are aimed at departments and institutions rather than individual women, aiming to challenge the idea that women simply need to behave more like men, and instead to suggest that systemic change is needed. This involves setting up policies and new practices, as well as implementing, supporting and raising awareness of them. Many institutions have family-friendly policies in place, but women were regularly not aware of them, did not feel comfortable asking for them or faced discrimination if they took them up.

Support for mid-career women's career development

This project has led to an improved understanding of the trajectory of academic women's careers. It reinforces the need for programmes to support and develop mid-career academic women as current and future leaders in their fields. This project is not a review of current programmes such as Aurora, Athena SWAN, mentoring schemes or coaching programmes. Nevertheless, the women we interviewed who had taken part in such support mechanisms generally found them helpful. We recommend the following:

- I Apply targeted institutional support for the mid-career stage, including mentoring, career planning and role definition and advancement.
- I Target research funding on the mid-career stage. With the concentration of research funding into large grants aimed at the professorial level and the additional focus on early-career grants and fellowships, many women felt the mid-career stage was left out.
- I Introduce fellowships and teaching breaks or reduced workloads for women returning from maternity or other leave.

Valuing mid-career academic women

While this project started from an interest in tackling gender imbalances in leadership, it must also be noted that only a minority of mid-career academics will become professors or senior managers. Of those who do attain senior positions, many will still spend the majority of their working lives at the mid-career stage. This suggests that the mid-career stage should be valued in and of itself, and not merely as a 'staging post' en route to a more senior position.

The project suggests that some mid-career academic women feel 'stuck' and undervalued, and some are concerned about their future in academic life if they are not promoted. Good institutions and departments will think about how to ensure that all staff members feel valued, and are given opportunities to develop themselves and their careers. Several institutional practices are necessary to ensure that talented and committed researchers and educators are not lost to academia simply because these individuals do not aspire to – or are not in a position to – attain the most senior positions. It is also important that achievements are not individualised; with research being judged through the Research Excellence Framework at the departmental level, this can provide a model for rewarding more collective roles. We recommend the following:

- I Recognise and reward collective activities and success, not solely individual achievements.
- I Give proactive support and development that are not only focused on attaining promotion.
- I Perform proactive assessments of readiness for promotion. Many women feel the need to have 'ticked all the boxes' to apply for promotion, or feel hesitant about applying.
- I Consider workload balance among individuals and teams, and avoid the gendered division of activities.

- I Develop genuine and collaborative ways of communicating achievements and success, such as departmental newsletters, a culture of sharing news, and/or structured web pages that communicate recent and noteworthy activities.
- I Introduce additional modes of recognition for essential work, including work that is collaborative and supports departmental and disciplinary cultures, such as personal tutoring, peer support, team leadership and outreach.

Prestige: setting indicators of esteem and rewarding what matters

This research has shown that women perceive high-status publications and substantial grant income to constitute prestige in academia. Other indicators of prestige included being invited to give keynote speeches at international conferences, editing journals and supervising PhD students. However, prestige is a gendered concept, and this research contributes to evidence that women find it harder to access the types of currency that advance their academic reputations.

What motivated many women were academic values such as the love of science, learning and the pursuit of knowledge, alongside aspects such as good working environments, flexibility, autonomy, collegiality and making a wider contribution to society. Women mentioned 'game-playing' to meet key performance indicators (KPIs) set by the institution, which often did not map onto outcomes related to disciplinary success or fulfilment of their duties (particularly teaching, managing labs and research teams, and building collective success). We recommend the following:

- I Consider what is valued by the institution and the discipline, and whether a wider range of activities can be developed into KPIs instead of relying on 'easy metrics'.
- I Develop rewards or recognition for collaborative working and team successes.
- I Provide clearer articulation of job roles and recognise all contributions, not only the most senior role. For example, if someone is, in effect, the day-to-day manager of a research centre, they could be named deputy director or similar rather than their role going unrecognised.
- I Encourage fair sharing of necessary, non-prestigious work throughout all roles including senior management, and promote better awareness of the jobs and tasks that tend to be gendered.

Strengthening flexible working practices


Flexible working practices were highly valued by women, and created cultures where individual needs were taken into account. Science departments had been particularly effective in improving the flexibility of working practices, often linked to Athena SWAN applications. Good practice in this area included keeping meetings to core office hours; enabling home working where possible; approving part-time contracts; and valuing part-time academics as full members of the team.

There are challenges here, however, even in institutions where flexible working practices are supported. Academic careers tend to involve very heavy workloads, and while this is not an ideal situation and should be tackled as an issue in its own right, the implications of such heavy workloads are that academics may never feel they are doing enough, and are likely to suffer from stress and exhaustion. This is true of men as well as women; however, workload is nevertheless a gendered issue. Women with caring responsibilities are likely to find heavy workloads particularly difficult. In addition, women academics, particularly those from working class, low-income and black and minority ethnic backgrounds, may be more likely to experience 'imposter syndrome' and to put additional pressure on themselves to work harder in order to 'measure up'. We recommend the following:

- I Departments and institutions should consult all staff on improving flexible working practices, and learn from good practice in other departments and institutions.
- I Institutions should seriously consider the impact of heavy workloads on staff wellbeing, with particular regard to the impact on women, carers, part-time academics and non-majority academic staff.
- I Departments should recognise that there will be ebbs and flows in careers, as personal and professional circumstances change in unpredictable ways. A departmental culture that values the contributions of all staff should be encouraged, to avoid individual staff feeling 'invisible' or undervalued.
- I Family-friendly and flexible policies need to be in place, supported and proactively encouraged.
- I Senior management needs to review the support and culture at departmental levels, where women most strongly experience discrimination or aggression in relation to flexible arrangements.

07 Developmental activity

We have designed a developmental activity that can be used by the Leadership Foundation and others to highlight the nature of women's career strategies. This is available for download from the Leadership Foundation's website at ([need URL](https://www.leadershipfoundation.org.uk/resources/mid-career-academic-women-strategies-choices-and-motivation)) and is shown in summary below.



Mid-career academic women: Strategies, choices and motivation
Kelly Coate, Camille B. Kandiko Howson and Tania de St Croix
A Developmental Activity
Leadership Foundation

Overview of the study

Mid-career Academic Women: Strategies, Choices and Motivation
Dr Camille B. Kandiko Howson, Dr Kelly Coate and Dr Tania De St Croix, King's College London

The project has been successful in investigating an oft-ignored segment of higher education: mid-career academic women. This project explored their career strategies, choices and motivation. The women interviewed were from a variety of disciplines (17) with a concentration on natural sciences. They represented nine different institutions (across institutional types). Participants were allowed to self-select as being mid-career, and included a variety of job titles: lecturer, senior lecturer, reader, research associate, senior research fellow, senior investigator and school director, reflecting disciplinary norms, women's non-standard career pathways and institutional differences.

Questions for follow-up I

- Where would you like to get to in 5 to 10 years time?
- What might help you to get there?
- What might the challenges or barriers be in getting there?

Sharing practice

Please send any feedback on the activity or on good practices to the project leaders. This is an on-going area of work and we are keen to push for initiatives and practices that support equality in academia. Details on next screen

Developmental activity

This activity can be done in number of ways:

- in teams
- with a mentor/mentee
- with a supervisor/employee
- with peers/a colleague
- alone

Concept mapping

- Concept maps are graphical tools for organizing and representing knowledge.
- They include concepts, usually enclosed in circles or boxes of some type, and relationships between concepts indicated by a connecting line linking two concepts.
- Words on the line, referred to as *linking words* or *linking phrases*, specify the relationship between the two concepts.

Questions for follow-up II

- What do you value in academic life?
- What is highly valued or considered prestigious by others in academic life?
 - In your department?
 - In your institution?
 - In your discipline?

For further information:

Contact information:

Dr Camille B. Kandiko Howson
King's Learning Institute
King's College London, UK
camille.kandiko_howson@kcl.ac.uk
@cbkandiko

Dr Kelly Coate
King's Learning Institute
King's College London, UK
kelly.coate@kcl.ac.uk
@kellycoate

Thank you!

Purpose

This activity can be used by leaders, supervisors, mentors or with peers in formal or informal settings.

The focus can be on how to develop and advance your career or how to support junior colleagues in doing so

Continued



Questions for follow-up III

- How do you communicate your successes and indicators of prestige?
- What does being mid-career mean for you?
 - When does being mid-career start and end?
 - How much do you think of your academic work in terms of career?

Materials

Sheet of A3 paper
Sticky notes
Pens

Or free concept-mapping software: <http://cmap.ihmc.us/>

Activity (5-10 minutes)

Draw a concept map using key concepts, and using phrases to link the concepts together. Feel free to use post-it notes and coloured pens. You are free to cross things out or use more paper.

Topic: Where do you see your career in five to ten years?

Looking forward

- Are there institutional policies or departmental practices that support equality?
- Do you have ideas, initiatives or ways of working which may make a positive difference?

08

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09

Appendix 1: Research participants

Name (pseudonym)	Academic discipline	Job / post	Nationality / ethnicity (self-defined)
Abby	Health policy	Senior lecturer	British, White
Alex	Economist	Lecturer	Dutch American, White
Amanda	Psychology	Senior lecturer	British, White
Bernadette	Cultural studies	Lecturer	German, White Other
Beth	Physics	Reader	British, English
Carol	Physics	Senior lecturer	French, White
Chloe	Engineering	Senior lecturer	Not recorded
Dee	Epidemiology	Lecturer	British, Caucasian
Diane	Medical education	Interim director	British, White Irish
Elaine	Health	Senior lecturer	British, White
Eve	Social sciences	Senior research fellow	UK, White
Fiona	Geography	Senior lecturer	British, White
Gina	Social sciences	Research associate	British, White
Haruka	Epidemiology	Senior research fellow	Japanese
Indira	Pharmacology	Lecturer	British, Indian
Janeru	Physics	Senior research fellow	Japanese
Kay	Psychology	Senior lecturer	British, White
Lara	Biomedical science	Reader	British, White
Melissa	Oncology	Research associate	British, White
Monique	Physical chemistry	Senior lecturer	French, White
Nina	Management	Lecturer	British, White
Olivia	Maths	Lecturer	Not recorded
Pat	Gerontology	Senior lecturer	British, White
Ruth	Sociology	Lecturer	British, White
Silvia	Genomics	Reader	Italian, White
Tess	Psychology	Lecturer	British, Mixed
Valerie	Life science	Senior investigator scientist	French, White
Wendy	Medicine	Clinical lecturer	British, White
Yvonne	Haematology	Reader	British, White
Zoe	Education	Senior lecturer	US/UK

Contact us at

info@lfhe.ac.uk

or connect with us



@LFHEMarketing



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**Leadership
Foundation**
for Higher Education

Peer House
8-14 Verulam Street
London WC1X 8LZ

T 020 3468 4810
F 020 3648 4811
E info@lfhe.ac.uk